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General 'Shocked' at Vietnam Assassinations

Retired Gen. William C. Westmoreland has testified that he was shocked to hear that assassinations occurred under the Phoenix program, which was launched when he commanded American troops in South Vietnam.

The objective of the program was "to neutralize the political cadre" of the Vietcong by defections or capture, Westmoreland said. "Apparently there were some wrongful actions associated with assassination rather than capture," he said, as that program expanded after he left Vietnam in mid-1968.

"To assassinate these people rather than capture them was wrong," Westmoreland said, "and I never sanctioned this at all."

Westmoreland's first detailed response to charges of assassinations in the wartime "pacification" process was made June 30 here. He was questioned in a pretrial deposition for his \$120 million libel suit against the CBS network over its 1982 broadcast, "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception."

Westmoreland charges that the television special falsely accused him of conspiring to suppress military intelligence about higher enemy force levels, in order to show progress in winning the war.

The dispute encompasses methods of accounting for Vietcong leaders and agents. They were the targets in the Phoenix program, but Westmoreland's attorneys said they regard the Phoenix operations as an extraneous issue in his suit.

Depositions in the case are ranging over many of the central issues in the war, from the bombing of Cambodia to the politics of the Johnson administration, with CBS gaining access to some previously secret government documents. Westmoreland began giving depositions in early April, and when CBS attorney David Boies raised the Phoenix issue on June 30, the transcript shows that Westmoreland was surprised by the line of questioning.

Westmoreland said the program "was initiated" in 1967 by Robert W. Komer, deputy commander for pacification, and "was basically a CIA program" with military support. When asked if the program had as one of its objectives "to assassi-

nate political cadre leadership," Westmoreland replied, "To the best of my knowledge, it did not."

When asked if any assassinations took place under the program, the general initially said "I don't know." Westmoreland said those allegations came after he returned to Washington in 1968 to become Army chief of staff.

Westmoreland said the purpose of the program "was a worthy one, in view of the type of war being fought. If there were any indiscretions involved . . . that was a matter that . . . I was not happy with; if such was the case."

He was asked by Boies: "Would it surprise you, sir, if I were to tell you that CIA Director [William E.] Colby testified in Congress that more than 10,000 political cadres were killed under the Phoenix program?"

"I'm unaware of that," the general replied, "... I don't recall ever hearing that before."

When asked if he would regard "the killing of more than 10,000 political cadres as part of an organized program of the American government" to be "more than an indiscretion in your mind," Westmoreland replied, "Well, it would be a serious indiscretion."

It is not clear from the transcript if the general construed the reference to 10,000 deaths in the Phoenix program as meaning there had been an acknowledgment by Colby of that many "assassinations." After a luncheon recess, the transcript shows, Westmoreland's attorney, Dan M. Burt, asked Westmoreland if he wished "to clarify" his statement on "alleged reports of assassination."

Westmoreland said "indiscretions" was "a poor choice of words . . ." On the question of assassinations, Westmoreland said, "My true feeling is that it was wrong. Definitely wrong . . . When I heard allegations to that effect I was shocked."

Under subsequent questioning by Boies, Westmoreland said he did not inquire personally into

the assassination reports, which were examined by other agencies, but said he understood that inquiries showed "there was substance to the allegation . . . Some political cadres had been assassinated." Asked if he knew how many, Westmoreland said, "I don't know."

Westmoreland said his successor in Vietnam, Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, "was, of course, aware of the allegations and, I gather, found some substance to it and . . . was concerned and put a stop to it."

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